

A ray of hope

PEOPLE G-K

Girls school in Afghanistan still flourishing

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You might think your commute is tough, but Razia Jan's is much worse.

She wears two hats, as the head of the Zabuli School for Girls in Deh Subz, Afghanistan and as the program director for the Arzu Foundation, a non-profit that works with women rug weavers known as the Hazara. It can sometimes take her 14 hours to get from one place to the other, across

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Razia Jan stopped by the Senior Center on Sunday to update residents on her work in Afghanistan with the Zabul School.

Zabuli School still growing

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dangerous mountain roads in a fragile part of the world.

Jan recently returned to Duxbury, a place she considers a second home and where she ran a tailor shop for years, on Sunday to update residents on the school's progress and her other work.

"I'm in Afghanistan ... but my soul and heart is here," she told the crowd at the Senior Center on Sunday.

March 6 was the start of the school's third year. There are now over 300 girls enrolled in grades K-6, and Jan says the school can stand tall with any private school in the region.

She showed a video of the young girls reciting English and practicing reading in Arabic.

"They don't want a day off," Jan said. "They want to be there all the time."

Patty Quigley, who runs Razia's Ray of Hope Foundation also spoke on Sunday and told the crowd of the tremendous work Jan is doing in Afghanistan.

"Her daily life ... it's not easy," Quigley said. "She is making a huge difference. She's quite a role model for the girls and the women when she stands up to the men."

Jan's work, especially with the school, requires some delicate cultural balancing. Across the street is a boys' religious school called a madrasa, and while not the terrorist hotspot some remote madrasas are, all it would take is one incident to destroy the fragile peace. Instead, Jan has cultivated a good working relationship with the school's head imam, supplying him with books on international religion and buying supplies for the school.

Yet, only a few days ago another girls school in the region was attacked by a gun-

HOW TO HELP

Checks can be sent to Razia's Ray of Hope Foundation, P.O. Box 81052, Wellesley MA, 02481

man, who killed all the students and teachers and then burned the building down. It's a reminder of what the girls and staff risk to bring education to the village of Deh Subz.

To that end, Jan is seeking to raise funds to finish building a wall around the school. When the building was first built, they did not have enough money to complete a proper wall and had to make do with wood beams — a structure that is now falling apart.

"Security is the most important thing to take care of," Jan said. "If they don't see, maybe they don't react."

Jan also sits down with the local leadership every six months to make sure the school is not stepping on any toes.

"Razia's trying to go with the system that's in place," said Quigley.

At the beginning of this year, some fifth grade girls said they would not be returning to the school because their fathers were insisting on them wearing traditional Islamic veils to cover their faces. Jan told them it was a worthy sacrifice to make to get an education and convinced them to come back.

"Five minutes you're wearing a veil to school, but you get seven hours of joy," she said.

Despite working within the system, Jan is far from a pushover. When the Zabuli School first opened, a local man told her she should be admitting boys, because men are "the backbone of Afghanistan." Jan turned around and said: "Well, I say the women

are the eyes and you all are blind."

She told the crowd, which included members of the Duxbury Rotary Club who helped raise the funds to build the school, how happy she was to have the support.

"I don't think we could have survived without your support," she said. "You are making a big difference."